

# PLOTS PROGRAM PROGRESS

## *More Acres, More Variety in 2004*

By Greg Freeman

A long-term goal of 1 million acres of private land enrolled in North Dakota Game and Fish Department programs by the end of the decade is well ahead of schedule and could be realized as early as 2006.

Heading into fall 2004, the Department's Private Lands Open To Sportsmen program has nearly 700,000 acres available for walking-access, an increase of 330,000 acres from this time last year. "Field crews will spend a lot of time pounding posts before September to make sure the signs are in place before the fall hunting seasons kick in," said Kevin Kading, Game and Fish private lands biologist.

That's a good thing, Kading said, because it means the Department is one step closer to its goal. "We have had some good things happen to the program the past few years," he said. "Some innovative ideas have spurred the program, and legislation has played a big role in accelerating the process."

Taking a look back, it's evident this plan required hard work, dedication and interest from private landowners, Game and Fish staff, legislators and hunters. All had to work together to achieve a successful campaign that benefits both landowners and individual users.

Game and Fish Department private lands programs are nothing new. Department biologists began working with private landowners interested in establishing wildlife habitat nearly 50 years ago. In the 1970s, the Department upped its efforts following creation of the interest money fund and the state habitat stamp. Interest earned from the fund and money generated from the stamp were available to private landowners in exchange for habitat development and hunting access.

The Department broadened its cost-sharing efforts in the 1980s to include tree plantings, grass seeding, food plots, and the Habitat Plot program – which offered rental payments for larger blocks of habitat that were either protected or established on private land.

In the early 1990s these varied programs fell under one umbrella known as the Private Land Initiative, which at the time had a bud-



Hunters this fall will have access to about 330,000 more acres of PLOTS lands in North Dakota than they did in 2003.

*With thousands of new acres being added to the Game and Fish Department's PLOTS program, Brandon Mason, and other Department private lands biologists, spent much of the summer making sure the new lands open to hunters were properly signed.*

get of \$2.3 million per biennium. PLI evolved with three main goals:

- Conservation of habitat for fish and wildlife populations.
- Provide landowners interested in wildlife conservation with cost-share assistance for developing and protecting wildlife habitat.
- Provide the public with opportunities to access fish and wildlife resources on private land, with the primary focus being hunting access.

Fast forward to the late 1990s and things began to happen. In 1997, the state legislature approved a bill that amended the Department's Private Land Habitat Improvement program by integrating public access, thereby allowing the Game and Fish Director to establish programs for landowner assistance that encouraged public access on private lands for the purposes of hunting. The bill also directed the Department to publish annually and sell a booklet describing lands open to public access in the state.

In September 1997, Game and Fish produced the North Dakota Public Land Guide at a cost of \$10. The guide contained maps of all 53 counties in North Dakota, including color-coded locations of state and federal lands open to public hunting access. In addition, a special insert was placed in each guide listing private lands open to hunting access through habitat and food plot agreements between Game and Fish and private landowners.

In 1998, four PLI programs involved nearly 61,000 acres of private land open to hunting under PLOTS. Habitat Plot (36,000 acres), Food Plot (700 acres), and Private Forest Conservation (5,000 acres) had been around for a number of years. The fourth program, Conservation Reserve Program Cost-Sharing program (18,000 acres), was relatively new and was funded by a \$2 increase to the habitat stamp that was enacted by the state legislature.

CRP Cost-Sharing received considerable attention after its inception, Kading said. It was especially attractive to producers because of the high cost of grass seed – \$40-\$50 per acre at the time – used to establish new CRP

plantings. The Department's program paid up to half the cost of the producer's grass seed, but couldn't exceed \$20 per acre.

This new program provided a major boost to the PLI, accounting for an additional 20,000 acres per year through 2001. CRP Cost-Share acreage has gained even more steam in recent years after additional incentives were added to the program.

The 1999 state legislature provided a twist to the public lands guide publication it mandated Game and Fish to produce the previous session. Instead of selling a public lands county map book, Game and Fish was directed toward publishing a free brochure describing areas open to public access.

The first effort was the 1999 PLOTS Guide, a 56-page booklet highlighting 90,000 acres of private land open to hunters through the Department's four cooperative programs. Also featured in the guide were state and federal lands, such as state wildlife management areas, federal waterfowl production areas, state school lands, national wildlife refuges and national grasslands, which are open to public hunting as well.

In 2001, the Department added a couple of new programs to its menu of choices, such as CoverLocks for Conservation and Tree Planting Cost-Sharing. CoverLocks uses U.S.



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Department of Agriculture's Conservation Reserve Enhancement Program to establish 20-acre habitat complexes along priority watersheds, and provides public access to the 160 acres encompassing the complex for 30 years. The Tree Planting Cost-Sharing program provides cost-share assistance to producers for tree plantings to improve wildlife habitat and provide public access.

In 2001, three full-time Department employees in Bismarck worked with the PLOTS program, which provided nearly 150,000 acres accessible to hunters, while district biologists and technicians in field offices across the state worked locally with landowners.

The PLI budget in 2001-03 was \$3.7 million. An Accelerated Access Program Enhancement, by direction of Governor John Hoeven, added an additional \$1.5 million from the Department's reserve fund. An

**PRIVATE LANDS INITIATIVE**  
**Access Acres Provided – PLOTS Program**

PROGRAM	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004
CRP C/S	40,750	61,108	82,428	127,735	229,431	250,652
Working Lands Plots					4,802	242,000
Habitat Plots	39,631	46,905	53,874	98,410	146,103	155,235
Native Forest	5,414	7,728	7,728	8,991	13,585	15,598
CREP/Coverlocks			640	10,140	14,879	14,879
CRP C/S Replacement				10,250	5,000	–
Waterbank	2,203	2,793	3,053	4,256	–	–
WRP Incentive				1,523	2,754	3,154
Tree Planting C/S			568	1,527	2,471	2,791
Beginning Farmer				1,200	1,600	2,080
Food Plots	701	695	231	1,501	4,626	550
<b>Totals (year end)</b>	<b>88,699</b>	<b>119,229</b>	<b>148,522</b>	<b>265,533</b>	<b>425,251</b>	<b>*686,939</b>

*\*as of July 17, 2004*

*Casey Anderson, Department private lands database specialist, secures a PLOTS sign to a post in Emmons County.*



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additional \$2.5 million was added to the next biennium's PLI base budget as well. The enhancement was designed to fund both current and new activities to gain public access on private lands.

In 2002, three full-time employees were added to the PLI staff, and were stationed in district field offices to help with the goal of adding 50,000 acres per year into the PLOTS program.

The Department also added two more options for landowners in 2002 – the Wetlands Reserve Program Incentive and Beginning Farmer program. The primary purpose of WRP is to restore, protect or enhance wetlands on private property, as well as provide public access. Beginning Farmer piggybacks on a North Dakota Natural Resources Trust program that offers incentives for beginning farmers who incorporate selected conservation measures into their operation, with public access included.

Last year, the state legislature, with Governor Hoeven's signature, committed an additional \$3.3 million to the program for the 2003-05 biennium. At that time, the Department had 300,000 acres enrolled in PLOTS, and the Department was given a goal of providing 1 million acres of public access to private lands to hunters by 2009. To carry out the effort, Game and Fish was authorized an additional five full-time employees stationed across the state.

An innovative concept called Working Lands accelerated landowner interest. Since early 2004 alone, landowners have enrolled 240,000 acres in Working Lands. Working Lands, initially designed by Tom Jones, Department private lands biologist, Jamestown, evaluates the wildlife and hunting value of lands actively being farmed or ranched, while also providing public access.

Working Lands PLOTS are not like other PLOTS tracts with which hunters are familiar, Jones said. "Until now, most PLI programs were directed at retiring lands from production, or lands already taken out of production by other programs, such as CRP," he said. "While land retirement programs remain a major component of our PLI, we recognized that there is good wildlife habitat contained within lands that are actively being farmed or ranched."

Working Lands is an option for producers who do not necessarily want to take acreage out of production, yet have quality wildlife habitat on their property and are willing to allow public access.

Biologists evaluate the land to determine



whether the parcel will be accepted into the program. Key characteristics include land stewardship, wildlife production, hunting habitat, accessibility to quality habitat, location, habitat diversity and habitat improvement.

"Please keep in mind that some of the Working Lands tracts may not appear to be made up entirely of quality wildlife habitat," Jones said. "However, every tract in Working Lands must have value as wildlife habitat or waterfowl feeding area, or the producer may be in the process of working with Game and Fish to develop or enhance habitat on the area for the future."

After all is said and done, nearly 700,000 acres of private land is available for hunters this fall in PLOTS tracts. They are easily distinguished in the guide, and are marked by yellow triangular-shaped signs in the field. "Remember to respect the land and its

owner," Kading said. "After all, it's hunter dollars at work, and poor behavior from hunters may influence the landowner's decision to sign up for the program in the future."

**GREG FREEMAN** is the Game and Fish Department's news editor.



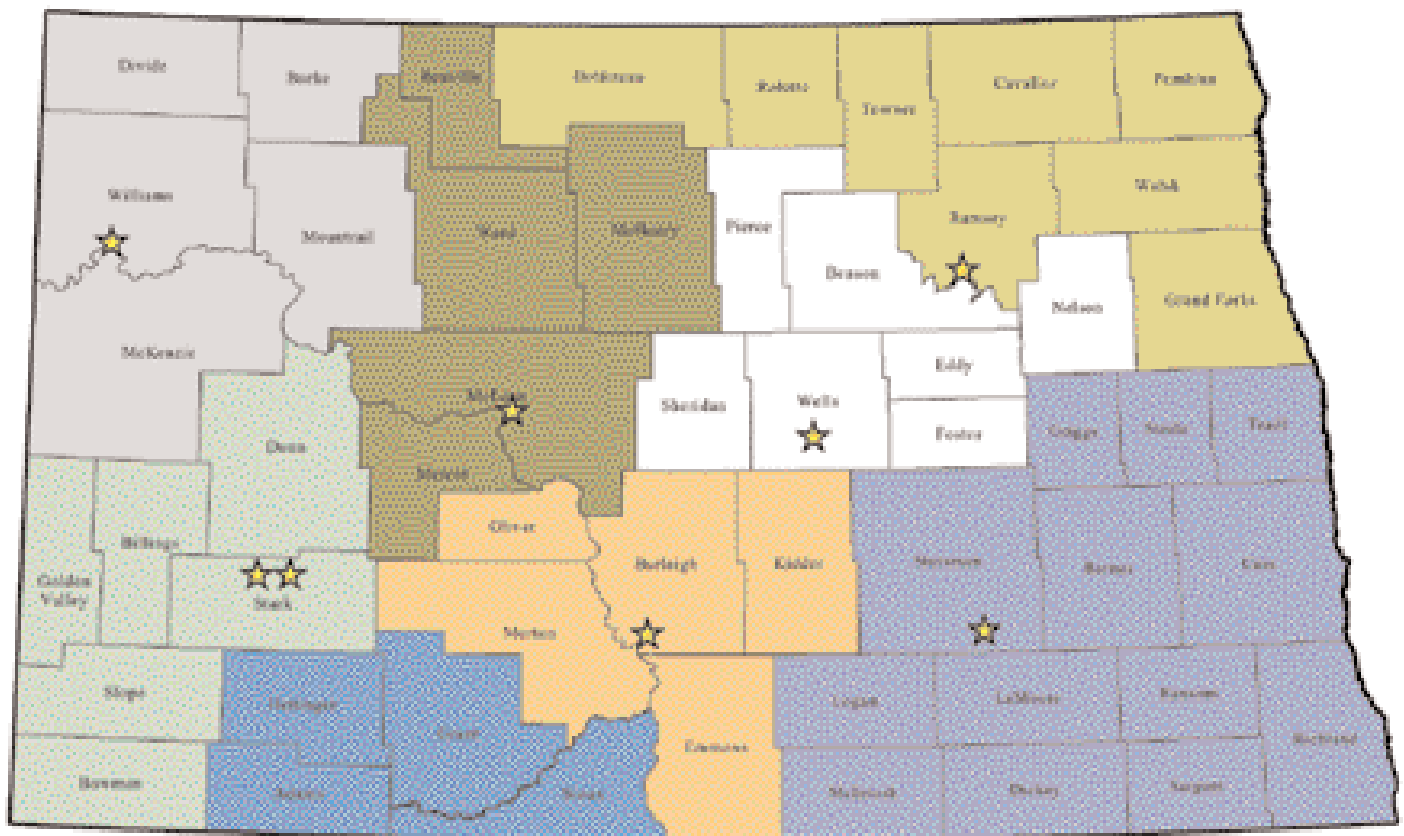
### Private Land Access Guide Available

More than 650,000 acres of private land are enrolled in the Private Land Open To Sportsmen program this fall, an increase of 300,000 acres from last year.

These walk-in areas are featured in the 2004 PLOTS Guide. The map book is free and contains scaled down maps that show PLOTS areas, roads and trail systems, and other state and federal public land.

The guide is available at the Game and Fish Department's main office in Bismarck, and at district offices in Riverdale, Williston, Dickinson, Jamestown, Lonetree (Harvey) and Devils Lake. Guides are also available at county auditor offices and many license vendors throughout the state.

## Private Lands Biologist Locations and County Responsibilities



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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Ryan Huber, Williston<br/>774-4329</li> <li>- Nate Harling, Dickinson<br/>223-7431</li> <li>- Nathaniel Umphrey, Dickinson<br/>223-7431</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Jeff Long, Riverdale<br/>654-7475</li> <li>- Brandon Mason, Bismarck<br/>328-9548</li> <li>- Tom Jones, Jamestown<br/>253-6480</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Caroline Littlefield, Harvey<br/>334-2311</li> <li>- Brian Prince, Devils Lake<br/>462-2417</li> <li>★ - PLI Contacts</li> </ul> |
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